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D-11 School Board: A turbulent first year

By Christine Hubbell

By any measure, the Colorado Springs District 11 School Board has had a turbulent year. Four new board members were elected in November of 2003 with money from pro-voucher advocates. Since that time, the board has struggled against a conservative agenda imposed by privatization advocates from both inside and outside the district.

The campaigns of Sandy Shakes, Willie Breazell, Craig Cox, and Eric Christen were financed by real estate developer Steve Schuck. Schuck has backed state-wide privatization efforts, including the Colorado Opportunity Contract Pilot Program, a voucher program that was signed into law in 2003 and struck down by the Colorado Supreme Court in 2004.

Schuck is also the vice chairman of the board of directors for the Greater Educational Opportunities Foundation (GEO), an Indianapolis-based pro-voucher organization. In June of 2001, GEO president Kevin Teasley sent his supporters a letter emphasizing his desire to control school boards in Colorado Springs. "We can have the school board hire choice-friendly lobbyists, approve more charter schools, ask the legislature to pass school choice legislation, etc.," Teasley stated in his letter.

D-11 directors Mary Wierman, David Linebaugh, and Karen Teja were not up for re-election in 2003. Many expected the four new directors to form an unbreakable (4 out of 7 directors) voting bloc that would ensure the success of conservative education policies. But school board president Shakes had no intention of blindly representing conservative issues. "I've always said I'm going to be an independent thinker," said Shakes. "I think a lot of people really misjudged who I was. I'm fairly moderate in my views."

The new board members came into office on a pro-voucher platform just prior to the board's reviewing charter

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FBI hate crimes report places Colorado Springs second in the state

By Archana Pyati

The annual rankings of hate crimes compiled by the FBI have just been released, and we in Colorado Springs have our work cut out for us.

Colorado Springs ranks number two in Colorado for the number of hate crimes committed last year, according to FBI statistics released earlier this month.

Each year, the FBI collects data on hate crimes reported by state and local law enforcement agencies.

For 2003, Colorado Springs reported 12 hate crimes, second in the state to Aurora, which reported 13 hate crimes.

The report breaks down each crime by the bias motivation of the perpetrators: race, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and disability.

In the Springs, eight of the hate crimes were committed because of race or ethnicity, three because of the victim's sexual orientation, and one because of religious bias.

Even one hate crime is too many, but looking at cities comparable in size to the Springs may keep things in perspective.

For example, the city of Mesa, Arizona reported 45 hate crimes. Twenty-six of those crimes had a racial or ethnic element. Eight were directed at people because of their sexual orientation, while nine were motivated by religious bias. surprisingly, two crimes were committed because of the victim's disability.

> *"There are some real inequities. You can't have protections for some groups, and none for others."*

The discrepancy in the numbers is not necessarily reassuring, according to civil rights advocates. More than likely, other states have more refined reporting techniques and better training programs for law enforcement officers to

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school applications. In December of 2003, the board lifted a 7% cap on charter school enrollment that was slowing new charters in the district. The vote opened the door for three new charter applications, but only one of the schools was approved — Life Skills Center of Colorado Springs.

The board approved the charter for Life Skills against the recommendation of the District Advisory Accountability Committee (DAAC), which is charged with reviewing charter school applications. In its recommendation, the DAAC cited duplication with existing D-11 programs and a concern that the schools could not meet their stated enrollment targets. Teja voted against the charter, but says it is too soon to evaluate the success of Life Skills, which opened in August. "The fact that they're going after students that have dropped out for 30 days — that they're going to provide an education for them — is a good thing," she said. "It's still too early to tell how successful they're going to be."

> ***If our community members do not get correct and complete information on an issue, they can't help us make improvements."***
>
> *— Director Mary Wierman*

By late spring, privatization advocates had turned their attention to vouchers. In June, Breazell, Cox, and Christen attempted to implement vouchers at the district level with a school board resolution entitled "Educational Services to Meet the Needs of Every Child." The resolution did not clearly explain which students would qualify for money, or which services would be contracted outside district schools.

Teja proposed an amended version of the resolution, which specified contracts for transportation and other services for students whose schools have been targeted for improvements under the No Child Left Behind Act or who qualify under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Shakes supported the amended resolution in a 4-3 vote. "I've always had problems with open-ended vouchers," said Shakes. "Someone from Greeley would have been able to use vouchers to go to a D-11 school, and that isn't local control."

Though conservatives on the school board may be unhappy with her voting record, Shakes says she is not against reform. "You have to define what reform is all about," she said. "Reform is bringing in accountability and a system that is more responsive to the students, being more efficient with our resources and as effective as we can be, in tune with the community. If you're going to say that reform comes through pushing a conservative agenda, I never signed up for that. Reform yes, but reform through the system."

The "system" in District 11 has juggled a number of other controversial issues in the past year. In January of 2003, a student Gay/Straight Alliance was denied official status by Palmer High School, despite the fact that other noncurricular student groups had been granted official status. In December, with the ACLU's help, the Alliance's student supporters brought a lawsuit (which has not yet been heard).

Delia Armstrong-Busby, chair of the Alliance for Quality Public Schools, supports the Palmer students. "Injustice is wrong, and any policy or practice that leads to any child being treated unjustly or leads to bias or intolerance is unjust," she said.

After the students filed the lawsuit, the district reclassified 30 noncurricular student groups in District 11 schools, moving them from "official" to "independent" status. However, the board tabled revisions to a policy that would define all noncurricular groups as independent.

> ***If you're going to say that reform comes through pushing a conservative agenda, I never signed up for that. Reform yes, but reform through the system.***
>
> *— Sandy Shakes*

In June, Breazell attempted to introduce a nonbinding resolution through which the school district would support "the definition, defense, maintenance and nourishment of stable, heterosexual, two-parent families" as a "central goal of public education." Responding to public pressure, Breazell removed the resolution from consideration. Breazell has since distanced himself from the issue, saying that it was too divisive.

Controversial agendas do generate record turnout at board meetings. At the December 8 meeting, students and parents filled the hall outside the small studio in the District 11 administration building and flowed into secondary meeting rooms to watch the board on closed circuit television. Pro-life neckties mingled with "support charter schools" t-shirts, as members of the public came forward to add their names to the list for public comments.

In November, parents and students began speaking out for and against Planned Parenthood's participation in a program that allows community groups to provide information to 10th grade health classes. At the December 8 meeting, a representative of Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains remarked that the organization had 88 years of experience in preventing unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, and cancer. The representative read from a letter sent to Planned Parenthood by School Board Superintendent Norm Ridder, written in early 2004. The letter praised the partnership between Planned Parenthood and District 11. Shakes expects the issue to continue to rivet the attention of parents and students. Despite the fact that Planned Parenthood is following the district's abstinence policy, "the name is a lightning rod," she said. A school board resolution to remove Planned Parenthood from a database of community resources could ultimately spell the end of Planned Parenthood's partnership with the district.

Internal conflict has also dogged the D-11 school board. The board recently stripped Eric Christen of his appointment as board treasurer, and publicly reprimanded him at the December 8 meeting for what his critics characterize as hostile behavior. Directors Teja, Shakes, Linebaugh, and Wierman all pointed to

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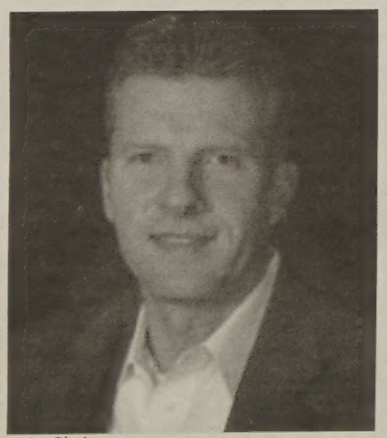
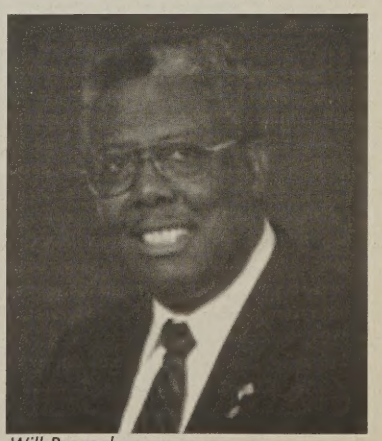
Craig Cox



Eric Christen

Sandy Shakes



Will Breazel

Aggressive inclusion and strong economies

By Lane Salter

"Aggressive inclusion" may be the key to the economic future of Colorado Springs. This concept was introduced on November 10th at the Colorado College by economist Richard Florida, the author of *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life*. According to Florida, aggressive inclusion refers to proactive inclusion of diverse groups and is a solid strategy for economic development. Florida emphasizes that aggressive inclusion increases a city's talent pool because creativity "defies gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and outward appearance".

Following up on Florida's speech, Citizens Project held a Coffee With Conscience discussion around the question, "Are tolerance and diversity essential to the economic health of the Pikes Peak region?" Thirty attendees, including a panel of Jose Aponte (Executive Director, Pikes Peak Library District), John Cassiani (Marketing Director, Greater Colorado Springs Economic Development Corporation), and Susan Edmondson (Director, Bee Vradenburg Foundation), exchanged ideas for enhancing tolerance and diversity in Colorado Springs.

"Aggressive inclusion increases a city's talent pool because creativity "defies gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and outward appearance."

Most of the discussion's attendees had also heard Florida's presentation. Aponte called Florida's message "timely, important, and germane" and challenged our community to "act on it, analyze it, and apply it". June Waller of the local NAACP and Citizens Project Advisory Council called Florida's suggestions for Colorado Springs "right on target". Edmondson hopes that the momentum created by Florida's visit will be used to transform Colorado Springs.

"It makes good economic sense to be inclusive," argues Aponte, because it will take us to the next level economically. All groups, including gay, disabled, and ethnic minority populations must be honored as valuable parts of the economic landscape and as a resource for the economic success of our city.

Cassiani said "kids want to be in diverse towns and we need young people for the future of our city." He hopes that Colorado Springs will become more tolerant because "the cities that will flourish are the ones who will accept everyone." Cassiani notes that a pleasant climate and setting, a substantial information technology workforce, and a growing military aerospace and homeland defense industry make Colorado Springs an "easy sell" to businesses that are hoping to relocate.

However, according to Cassiani, one economic recruitment obstacle is our city's reputation as homogeneous, ultra-conservative, and intolerant. He noted that companies that consider relocating to Colorado Spring sometimes do not come, specifically because they fear their employees will be unhappy in what is perceived as a uniform, intolerant community. Cassiani has seen that Colorado Springs's reputation for intolerance and lack of diversity are "costing us jobs".

Edmondson challenged Colorado Springs to "foster an energetic and creative environment and say that everyone is welcome, and mean it." Edmondson expressed concern that Colorado Springs will have trouble replenishing the workforce as the baby boomers retire. She fears that Colorado Springs is behind the times in regard to diversity and tolerance and that we may not be able to attract anyone under forty because younger generations are looking for places where they can be around people who are different than they are.

How can Colorado Springs move forward? Edmondson suggested that Colorado Springs invest in public relations and marketing efforts to change its reputation of intolerance. She emphasized that a marketing campaign must be accompanied by proactive plans to address diversity issues, so that we can go beyond slogans and lip service and change the root of what we are as a community.

Aponte said the first step is to create a blue ribbon panel, endorsed by our city government and made up of business, political and community leaders. This panel would research relevant literature, speak to community leaders, and hold focus groups in order to propose an action plan for enhancing diversity and tolerance. Aponte believes that local businesses should write diversity plans in which inclusion efforts become intrinsic to all aspects of work. The Pikes Peak Library District recently developed such a plan and it will assist the organization's efforts to strengthen diversity in the workplace and reassure potential employees who are reluctant to relocate to Colorado Springs.

Aponte also suggested that Colorado Springs desperately needs an Office of Cultural Affairs to enhance our city's arts and cultural programs. Aponte recognized that the lack of money, political will, and commitment is a barrier to change but he sees nothing but opportunities across the board.

Edmondson said that she hopes that elected leaders and corporate leaders make diversity issues a top priority, which would send an important message to the community. City council member Jerry Heimlicher reminded attendees that citizens must stand behind those local leaders who take risks on behalf of diversity and tolerance.

Waller said she wished that there were more funding for local sociological research and for organizations that address diversity issues. Then intolerant social attitudes and behavior could be combated more effectively.

Editor's note: All comments represent individual opinions, not necessarily the view of their organizations. Due to the high level of interest in Florida's ideas and our follow-up discussion, Citizens Project hopes to hold additional community meetings to address diversity and "aggressive inclusion" in our community. Check our website for future events.

Florida-speak 101

Economist Richard Florida asserts that America is experiencing an economic transformation and entering an era in which the economy is "based fundamentally on human intelligence, knowledge, and creativity." He cites a growing Creative Class which constitutes almost one-third of the American workforce and accounts for nearly half of all wage and salary income in the United States. The creative talent of this new class is the resource fueling the new economy, and it is this resource that cities must attract and retain if they are to thrive.

Florida observes that creative talent flocks to communities offering an attractive lifestyle and that businesses must follow these clusters of talent. Companies prefer relocating to communities that appeal to young creative types, and cities are realizing they must strive to be appealing. Cities that combine the three Ts — Technology, Talent, and Tolerance — have the edge in this emerging economy.

Florida's findings show that the cities with high diversity rates are the ones with thriving economies. Colorado Springs falls short on its overall diversity index, which is Florida's index with three sub-indices: the bohemian index (which measures the number of artists, writers, and other creative types), the gay index, and the foreign-born index. On the overall diversity index Colorado Springs is 199th out of 268 cities. These indices, especially the gay index and the overall diversity index, are highly predictive of economic health and innovation because they signal a community attractive to young creative people and conducive to creativity and innovation.

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allegations of abuse of power, including claims that Christen had threatened a district employee with dismissal and referred to a teacher as a "moron." Director Wierman cited concern with inaccurate and inflammatory comments made by Christen. "If our community members do not get correct and complete information on an issue, they can't help us make improvements," she said.

Christen defended himself by expressing his frustration with his inability to affect reform. "For the past year, instead of arguing for reform, we have more of the status quo, more of the same," he said. He presented CSAP scores to make the point that the district is not dealing with issues of importance. Admitting that he may be tactless in his public comments, Christen said the outrage should be directed to the fact that "we are failing our kids." Obviously emotionally affected, Christen added, "This is an implicit, if not explicit, attempt to silence me." Shakes and Linebaugh in particular expressed their intent to reprimand Christen only for his behavior and not his opinions.

According to Shakes, the important work of the district has continued beneath the surface controversy. Shakes cited the rapid implementation of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) as one of the board's most important achievements in the last 12 months. "I think people do realize that accountability is here to stay. CQI was implemented in a timely way, and we've completed the training that includes the evaluation piece," said Shakes. "That and aligning the curriculum are probably the best things that will bring up student achievement."

Armstrong-Busby also warns against focusing only on controversy. "If you look behind the discourse, you'll see the conversation is about children," she said. "There are so many divergent points of view on the board of education, and [for board president Shakes] to pull all of that together and be able to act has been exceptional."

The District 11 school board may continue to be challenged in the coming year by privatization issues and internal conflict. Director Breazell repeatedly referred to legal issues that may result from the Christen reprimand. The Democratic majority in Colorado's General Assembly will make new voucher legislation in 2005 unlikely, but that issue could resurface during school board elections next November. According to Teja, vouchers would devastate the school district, pulling funding from district schools without providing oversight. "While we have some excellent private schools in our district," said Teja, "when you have tax money going to private schools, you should be demanding oversight."

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recognize hate crimes when they see them, said Pat Steadman, a lobbyist for Equal Rights Colorado.

In Colorado, we have a state law protecting people from crimes that are motivated by bias against race, color, ancestry, religion, or national origin. The Ethnic Intimidation law, passed in 1988, does not include protection against crimes committed due to sexual orientation, gender identity, mental and physical disabilities, or age.

Equal Rights Colorado has been working since the early 1990s to expand the law's protections. Each year, attempts to change the law have failed, mostly due to resistance to extending projections to gays, lesbians, and transgendered people. Two years ago, Rep. Mark Larson (R-Cortez) cosponsored a bill that would have added sexual orientation, gender identity, age, and disabilities as protected categories. The bill passed the state Senate, but died in the House.

"The fact that the law does not include sexual orientation or gender identity is a glaring omission," said Steadman, who added that these are "targeted groups" for hate crimes.

"There are some real inequities. You can't have protections for some groups, and none for others."

Last year, Equal Rights Colorado tried to get a bill passed that would have required law enforcement officers to undergo training to better identify hate crimes in their investigations. This bill also failed.

Be part of the solution.

"Citizens Project gives the public an opportunity to report injustice, to be listened to and then be part of the solution."

– Sharon Berthrong, board member and CP supporter

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MISSION:

Citizens Project spotlights issues in the Pikes Peak region and mobilizes people to strengthen the traditional values of our nation: equal rights, individual freedoms, separation of church and state, civic engagement, and respect for diversity.

Citizens Project

P.O. Box 2085
Colorado Springs,
Colorado 80901
Phone: (719) 520-9899
Fax: (719) 520-0118
www.citizensproject.org
email:
info@citizensproject.org

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